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## ERNIE RUSSELL

BY BLAMIRE YOUNG

*Many tales have appeared in which the private soldier has been pictured as a hero and the possessor of all the virtues, but the following from The English Review shows that the human derelict sometimes wears the King's uniform.*

ERNIE RUSSELL was one of those individuals that came to the surface when the depths of society were stirred by the outbreak of war in August of 1914. Lord Kitchener threw his net wide, and he took some queer fish; Ernie Russell was one of the queerest.

It may have been indignation at the violation of the rights of small countries; Sergeant Spiller thought it was not. In knowledge of men George was pre-eminent even among sergeants, and in matters of this kind I always took his dictum as final, for I never knew his intuition to fail. George believed that the war was accepted by the nondescript fringes of society, to which Russell belonged, as a definite calamity from which there was no possible escape. Many of them stayed not to feel the pinch that they knew would come; they recognised the hopeless nature of the struggle, and acted accordingly. It so fell out that Russell joined "the Queen's," and found himself in Spiller's platoon, Spiller being a platoon sergeant at the time.

Russell was not an addition to the Queen's from any point of view. He had led the wandering, casual life too long to become a soldier. He was untidy and quarrelsome, and an unfailing source of trouble to his sergeant. He became the butt of the platoon, the perpetual focus of unsparing jests, which he fiercely resented. He had the queer, shifty ways that belong to lonely men, and he was powerless to hide them or shake them off. One of his peculiarities was that he never carried matches.

Instead, he kept his pockets loaded with paper which he picked up in the trenches. When his fag went out, which was every few minutes, he sidled up to a brazier—a tiny, hazardous fire that struggled to warm the few men who crouched over it—and he entered into conversation in as casual a way as he could assume. During the conversation he would draw out of his pocket a piece of charred paper, insert it into the heart of the little fire, light his fag, extinguish the flame, and replace the paper in his pocket. After he had repeated this manœuvre three or four times in the course of a cold morning, the owners of the fire began to "rumble" Russell's manœuvre. These trench fires require most careful coaxing to burn at all, and are so small that a piece of paper stuffed into their vitals is enough to disorganise them, so a plan would be concerted for the next visit. Ernie would begin the conversation in the usual friendly way, but whenever he edged round to the fire a broad back would intervene. Try as he would the front remained unbroken, until at last he was made to understand that the obstruction was intentional. Ernie then would single out an offender and "tell him off" in terms that left no room to doubt his feeling of indignation at the outrage offered him. Then, regardless of shells or rifle fire, the two would roll all over the trench in a fierce struggle, and Russell would be dragged off his opponent by the onlookers before he could draw his knife or inflict some horrible wound with his teeth or his nails.

George was always precise and particular in his description of Russell's appearance. He was of middle height with a stoop. His resemblance to a walrus was the result of a drooping fair moustache that hung down on each side of his chin. His nose was always running, and he had large blackheads in his ears. Many a time did George detail two men to take Russell to the pump in the farmyard and wash him—a discipline that had, however, small remedial value. His greatcoat was too long for him, and as he walked it flapped dejectedly from side to side.

Every morning the corporal would report the men who were sick. After a lot of names and numbers the list would always close with "and thirty-five seventeen Russell E." Russell invariably "reported sick" so as to escape duty, as he hoped. Authority, nevertheless, often deigned otherwise. By his habits and his unfailing resource in thinking of new ailments he made himself a nuisance to his superiors, and many attempts were made to pass him surreptitiously into some other platoon; but Ernie always came back again. On one occasion he had been sent to the base hospital, more for convenience than for hygienic necessity, and great hopes were entertained by No. 9 Platoon owing to his long absence that Russell had left their ranks for good. George was sitting in the barn in which they were billeted, after returning from the trenches, when the men came running in to say that Russell was coming down the road. Sure enough there was Ernie slouching along towards the farm, with his coat sagging from side to side, and his yellow moustache hanging on each side of his large yellow teeth. In some things he was regimental and conscientious. He came up to George, stood at "attention," and said, "I'm to report to you, sergeant." "To me!" says George;

"not on your life! You'll report to No. 3, and look quick about it." The sergeant of No. 3 Platoon would have none of him. "Go back to your own platoon; you don't belong here. Tell Sergeant Spiller we're not taking any Russells—not likely!" So No. 9 Platoon shouldered its cross once more and resumed its ordinary life.

One day Sergeant Spiller was attending to the multitudinous details of his rank, and everyone was busy and preoccupied, when a sudden clamour filled the barn. All eyes were turned to the loft, from which the noise came. The loft was a dark room amongst the beams of the roof, and a ladder with worn and broken steps led up to it. Presently two swaying figures appeared at the loft door. They clutched one another in a fierce embrace, and presently pitched down the ladder in a succession of jolts till they reached the barn floor. Undeterred by the fall, they continued the struggle, screaming, swearing, and tearing at one another like wild beasts. The inquiry brought to light the following facts. After the men had been dismissed there had been a rush for the loft. Among the first to gain the coveted abode was Russell. But he had reckoned without Ireland. When Russell jerked O'Meara's equipment to the floor the Irishman seized him in his forceful arms, and the battle began. Almost at once Russell had seized O'Meara's nose in his teeth, and with a bulldog grip had held on. George Spiller meted out punishment to the two with admirable impartiality, and the incident closed.

Russell lost no time in renewing his attendance on the doctor. He claimed the daily right to report sick and pour the story of his endless ailments into the professional ear until the medical staff could bear it no longer. They had found that Russell's visits to the base hospital were no real escape from the intolerable burden

of his presence. They realised that to shake him off permanently some other turn of events would have to come to their assistance.

On a cold morning, soon after the incident of the loft, Ernie was surprised to find the doctor's greeting quite affable.

"What! My old friend Russell! Upon my word, you don't say so! And how is Russell?"

"All right, sir."

"All right, are you, Russell? No! I can't believe it. There's something wrong, surely. What's the matter, Russell?"

"Pain in my stomach, sir."

"Pain in your stomach! Dear, dear! And what else?"

"Me leg's stiff, sir."

"Of course it is. Now let me see. Corporal!"

"Yes, sir."

"Corporal, here's our old friend Russell with us again this morning. I want you to get me that mouth-organ that we got for Russell. You know where it is?"

The corporal looked puzzled.

"Mouth-organ, sir?"

"Yes, the mouth-organ. You know. It's on the table in the——"

"Ah, yes, sir."

Before half a minute the corporal returned with an old mouth-organ lacking several reeds.

"That's it, corporal. And the peppermints—you know where the peppermints are. Yes, thank you. Now, Russell, listen to me. Did you ever hear of Piper Findlater?"

"No, sir."

"Never heard of Piper Findlater? You astonish me! Well, Piper Findlater was the piper belonging to the Dargai Highlanders. He played on pipes—Scotch bagpipes, Russell. Beautifully he played them too. Well, once when his regiment was drawn up before the enemy—this was

just before an attack, you understand. In the early morning, if I remember rightly, wasn't it, corporal?"

"In the early morning, sir."

"Quite so. In the early morning the Dargai Highlanders were expecting an attack from the enemy, and weren't feeling too good about it—as sometimes happens, you know, Russell. Piper Findlater saw that the men's spirits were not quite up to concert pitch. So what did he do but march up and down the front of the line playing 'The Campbells are Coming'—or was it 'Bonnie Dundee,' corporal?"

"'Bonnie Dundee,' sir."

"Yes, that was it, 'Bonnie Dundee.' And he played it magnificently—as I told you, Russell, didn't I? I told you he was a great player on the bagpipes."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, now, I want you to be Piper Findlater, Russell."

"Yes, sir."

"Can you play on the mouth-organ, Russell?"

"No, sir."

"Well, you must try your best. It's quite easy. Govern these vantages—No, that's not it, is it, corporal? Anyway, I want you to take the mouth-organ and the peppermints and report yourself to Sergeant Spiller, and say you are to be Piper Findlater and march up and down the top of the trench playing magnificently upon the mouth-organ for the encouragement of the men in the trenches. Do you understand, Russell?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought you would. Now cut along and let me hear great things of you, Russell—great things."

George Spiller was eating his breakfast when Russell reported himself.

"I'm to march up and down on top of the trench and blow this 'ere affair, sergeant, same as Piper Someone-or-other did."

"Well, jump up and get on with it."

So while the men were eating their breakfasts a gaunt figure slouched along the top of the trench, blowing aimlessly into the dilapidated mouth-organ. His coat swung from side to side as he walked. A large peppermint thrust out the lank cheek beside the drooping moustache. A more deplorable object could not well be imagined. He was in full view of the enemy's trenches, a perfect target for a sniper, but not a shot was fired at him. He was there until he got so cold that he implored George to let him come down again into the trench. He cursed the doctor. He cursed the mouth-organ. He cursed the Germans. At length George cursed him, and told him to come down. The language required to do justice to the episode of the mouth-organ, as it was done by Sergeant Spiller, used to make my mouth water. It can only be remotely suggested.

Russell's funambulist exploit on the top of the trench during the early hours of that cold winter morning brought him notoriety more than fame. Not that he was lacking in notoriety before that incident. He had always got more than his share. His misplaced and unnecessary gallantry was not received by the regiment as a sign of grace. Rather did it add fuel to the fire, and the gibes at his expense were intensified. This, as may be expected, led him into further quarrels, and the patience of his superiors was tried to breaking-point in consequence. The platoon commander and platoon sergeant found themselves in complete sympathy on the question of Russell's presence in the ranks. The thing was getting on their nerves; they discussed many ways in turn whereby they might rid themselves permanently of the incubus. They felt that the doctor had done his part, and that no further help could reasonably be expected from

that quarter. They remembered the words of Henry, the eighth of that name: "Who will rid me of this turbulent priest!" And if they did not do so to one another, they made a paraphrase to the royal appeal in their own minds and set their wits to seek out an effective solution.

Shortly after there was some outbreak on the part of Russell of a particularly undisciplined character, but I had better pass over the incident and go on to the important matters that arose from it. It must be borne in mind that it was really the long array of Russell's misdemeanours that made the climax possible; but it was this particular incident that set, as it were, the match to the fire.

The platoon commander and the platoon sergeant were discussing matters in the dug-out of the former. When they had got to the end of the details of the moment, George addressed the officer in some such words as these:

"I have considered Russell's case from all points, and have come to the decision that we can only take one course. I have done all I can with him. I have punished him, cautioned him, defended him until I have reached the end of my patience. The moral of the platoon is being undermined by his example, and the forbearance of the men when off parade cannot be expected to last for ever. I feel, sir, that there is only one way out of it. Russell must die an honourable death!"

"I wish to all the gods he would!"

"He has neither kith nor kin. He shall die an honourable death in the face of the enemy."

"Well, sergeant, I leave the matter in your hands. You are responsible for the platoon's discipline, and you may be sure of my support in whatever you do. All I ask is that you give me no details. Is that clear?"

"Quite clear, sir."

"Just pass the word for my orderly, will you?"

\* \* \* \*

The short winter day was drawing in. The 1st Queen's were in the trenches and fire was slackening. Opposite them there was a Bavarian regiment—a good-natured lot who took life cheerfully.

"Good-night, Queen's!" came across the intervening ground; for by some unknown means they always know what regiment is occupying the British trenches. They welcome them when they arrive and chaff them when they go.

"No more fire till to-morrow!"

"Good-night, Fritz!"

"Good-night, Englisher!"

Every evening at nightfall—what time the suburban householder collects his garden tools, locks them in his tool-house, and turns his face towards the drawing-room fire and the evening paper—the Bavarians used to light a large brazier and mount it upon the top of their trench. There it burnt till morning, a beacon in the waste of war. At this hour, a few days after the conversation recorded above, Sergeant Spiller sent for Private Russell.

"Russell, we are short of coal. I want you to go over to B Company and ask the sergeant-major if he will oblige me with a sack of coal till morning."

"Yes, sergeant."

"Do you know where B Company is?"

"No, sergeant."

"Well, you see that fire over there," indicating the Bavarians' brazier. "That is where B Company is."

The trenches at the front of the line took some queer turns, and there was therefore nothing very remarkable in the assertion that the trenches on the half-right front should belong to B Company.

"You understand the place I mean?"

"Yes, sergeant; over there by the burning fire."

"That's it. Now you'll pop over the parapet and make your way there, ask for the sergeant-major, and give him my message."

"Yes, sergeant."

"All right, then. Off you go, and mind the wire!"

Russell had no sooner scrambled to his feet at the top of the trench and started on his way than there was a crash, a roar, a rattle. Pandemonium broke loose, and the mud and stones fell in showers over the trench. It seemed as though the whole of the Bavarian fire had been suddenly directed upon the spot where Russell was last seen. This vengeful fire continued without a pause for three or four minutes. It ceased for a few moments, and then broke out again with the same fury. This continued for some time, and presently ceased altogether. Then night fell, and all the ways were darkened.

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The next morning, when the usual examination of arms was in progress, Sergeant Spiller looked up and saw what appeared to be a human scarecrow hopping painfully along the top of the trench towards him. It was Russell. He lowered himself into the trench, stood at the "attention," and formally reported himself to his platoon sergeant.

"I never got to B Company's lines, sergeant," he said. "As soon as ever I started the lousy cows let go at me, so I lay there all night, and I've come back to report myself. I never got no bloody coal."

"No, I don't suppose you did," said Sergeant Spiller, looking as if he was speaking to a ghost. "Did you get hit?"

"No, sergeant, not that I knows on, but me feet's froze."

And not long afterwards Ernie Russell was back.